

Beekeeping Calendar

The purpose of this calendar is to give the beginner a guide of what is needed, together with approximate timing. Of course years do vary, with some springs being several weeks in front or behind others. As gardeners will know, by August everything has levelled out. It would pay to look at the month either side of the one you are in, as there may be something relevant that needs doing, or should have been done.

This calendar is not intended to be comprehensive, merely a reminder of some of things that will need to be done every season.

The beekeeping year should logically start when the crop is harvested and feeding starts, but for clarity I will start in January.

January

Same as November and December. Towards the end of the month pollen may be coming in. Look at seed and plant catalogues for ideas on planting for bees. You won't increase yields, but it adds interest to your garden.

If you don't already do it there are good reasons for keeping hive records. Look for standard ones, or design your own to suit yourself. This can easily be done on computer.

February

"Hefting" every 2-3 weeks from now on, but remember to take into account the weight of the hives as these might vary considerably, depending on the weight of the hive empty, and the age of the combs. If you are concerned about food you can smoke the bees and gently remove the crown board. If you see capped stores on several frames they will be O.K. for at least a couple of weeks. If you have prolific bees they will start to use stores quickly from now on. On warm days pollen should be coming in. This is usually a sign that the colony has a laying queen. Those that are not bringing in much pollen, or the loads are light may have a failed queen or be queenless. Do not be alarmed if you see bees collecting water. They will do this until there is sufficient nectar coming in they can evaporate water from.

Cover feed holes towards the end of the month.

March

On warm days there should be plenty of activity with mainly pollen, but some nectar coming in. Brood rearing is moving on fast now and this is when most colonies die of starvation.

Syrup may be fed in a contact feeder, but only if necessary. Some books will tell you to feed thin syrup to stimulate the queen into laying more eggs, but I have never found this necessary, only feeding thick syrup to avoid starvation. Mouse guards can be removed.

Inspections can be made on warm days, but be careful you don't chill the brood.

April

Over the years April has proved to be the most variable month, with bees either needing feeding or supering, or both. A weeks good or bad weather can make a huge difference to a colony in the spring.

On a warm day spring cleaning can be done. As all brood combs are seen it will give you a chance to fully assess the colony. Mark any poor combs with a drawing pin in the top bar, so you can deal with them during the season. As OSR should come into flower later in

the month it is better to super in advance. Use any supers that weren't used last year first, in order to rotate them and keep them in good condition.

Regular inspections of strong colonies will be needed as this is the start of the swarming season. As soon as there are drones in colonies queen rearing can be started.

Providing there is no disease you can "equalise" colonies by changing positions of stronger and weaker ones. This will bolster the weaker, and may prevent the building of swarm cells in the stronger.

Set up a bait hive in the hope of catching a swarm.

May

Continue with regular inspections. These can be every 14 days if your queens are clipped, otherwise 7. Keep supering in advance of requirements, bearing in mind that when OSR is in flower a strong colony can easily fill a super in a week if the weather is favourable, so will need at least two empty supers if the weather is good and you don't inspect your bees for 14 days. This is a good time to get good brood combs built if a broodchamber is used as a super.

June

Extract honey when the OSR is showing predominately green. Any delay will mean you have granulation in the combs. Replace wet supers at dusk. Continue with regular inspections. Prolific bees will probably have little or no food in the broodchamber, and you have taken off all their stores. A few days poor weather could mean starvation, so check and feed if necessary.

July

There is little point making regular inspections after the second week. Only add supers if absolutely necessary. Think about replacing poor queens, but raise them yourself.

August

Due to the shortening days nectar income will slow down, and there will be a tendency for the bees to store it in the brood chamber. Close down hive entrances early in the month to prevent robbing by other bees and wasps. Extract honey towards the end of the month. Check the amount of food in the broodchamber and feed if needed. Make sure that all queens are good enough to bring the colony through the winter. Thymol based varroa treatments can be administered after super removal, but read instructions, and try to understand what is happening.

This is the time to start thinking about getting strong healthy colonies in the spring.

September

Continue feeding. In recent years there has been a honey flow from ivy which granulates solid. Make sure the queens are not crowded out, and be prepared to super again if needed, but remove them before the honey granulates.

Unite weak colonies, or those with failing queens.

October

Finish feeding if not already done. "Heft" the hive and make mental notes. Fit mouse guards towards the end of the month, and uncover the feed hole in the crown board to give through ventilation. If this is a long slot to fit a Porter escape then put the crown board on so that the slot is running across the frames to make it easy for checking the food supply during

the winter without removing the crownboard. Make sure that all vegetation is removed from the base of the hive to give a free flow of air. Check the roof doesn't leak, which can be easily done by upturning it after heavy rain. As late as possible inspect the colony to make sure the queen is still laying worker brood.

This is probably your last chance to unite colonies.

November

This is the first of three fairly quiet months. "Heft" hives every 6 weeks or so. There will be little change until February in "native type" bees, but the more prolific ones can breed throughout the winter and use a lot of food. There is free time to repair equipment and generally prepare for the coming season. Check hives occasionally to make sure all is well. Bees will fly quite strongly on warmer days but will stay in cluster in order to survive. If you are concerned, then on a cold day remove the hive roof and put your ear to the feedhole. Then give a sharp tap on the crown board. If the bees make a roar then quickly subside all is well. Prolonged roaring usually means queenlessness. If bees need moving this can be done after there has been 10-14 non flying days. Just close the entrance up and move them gently. It would probably do little harm to keep the entrance closed for another week if needed.

The winter months do give an opportunity to read specialist books on subjects such as cookery, mead making, candle making, queen rearing etc. There are some good beekeeping websites that you might wish to visit.

December

As November. If you haven't already done it perhaps you can consider taking the BBKA Basic Exam. It is in two parts, a practical session at the hive, and some questions on a variety of beekeeping subjects. You may not be an "exam type" person, but a look at the syllabus on the BBKA website will give you ideas on the areas where you need good knowledge.

Oxalic Acid can be trickled when there is no brood likely to be in the hive. See elsewhere for details.

Throughout the season there are things that should be done on a regular basis, these being checking the brood for disease, and monitoring for varroa. The good beekeeper will always be aware of the state of their colonies at all times of the year.

If you don't already know it, take the opportunity to read up on the life cycles of queens and workers, and understand what happens during the swarming process. Learn to recognise diseases, especially the foul broods.

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